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The Simplicity *and* Popularity *of the Divine Revelations, and their* Suitableneſs *to the Circumſtances of Mankind.*

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SERMON

Preached in the HIGH CHURCH of *Edinburgh*,

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At the opening of the SYNOD of LOTHIAN and TWEEDDALE,

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One of the Miniſters of *Edinburgh*.

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SERMON.

DEUT. XXIX. 29.

The ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God; but thoſe things which are revealed, belong to us and our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.

AN inquiry into the conſtitution of nature, and into the laws of the divine government, may be ranked amongſt the moſt worthy exerciſes of the human mind. When ſearches of this kind are duly conducted, they can hardly fail of a great reward. To bring them, however, to this good iſſue, ſome regulations are highly requiſite. The ſubject of inquiry ſhould lie within our reach; our regard to every truth ſhould be proportioned to its certainty and importance, and the knowledge we acquire of ſuch a kind, as contributes to the improvement of human life.

Without

Without theſe qualifications, our reſearches may be vain and our opinions pernicious. We may be prying into thoſe ſecrets, which God hath reſerved to himſelf; we may be poſitive in matters which are at beſt uncertain, and perhaps ſtamping the conjectures of men with the authority of God; or we may be conſuming our time in barren ſpeculations that can neither influence the heart or the life. For preventing the miſapplication, and for directing us in the uſe of the talents which God hath given us, the words of the Text ought to have much weight. They proceeded from a wiſe Man and a great Legiſlator, under the ſpecial direction of Almighty God. They furniſh a ſtrong check to vain curioſity, and an incitement to the moſt valuable knowledge, that knowledge which is fit for the government of human life. *The ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God.* Some truths will for ever be inacceſſible to mortals, and all attempts to diſcover them, vain and fruitleſs; ſome may be ſuffered to lie hidden for a time, that in a future period they may be diſcloſed with greater advantage; but others there are of ſuch moment to the happineſs, and ſo ſuitable to the preſent circumſtances of mankind, that they are now brought to light; or, if formerly known, they are now eſtabliſhed by divine authority, and given for a rule of faith and manners. Theſe are the *things revealed, which belong to us and our children*

children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Without fixing more preciſely the meaning of theſe words, or determining the peculiar reſpect which they have to the circumſtances wherein the *Iſraelites* were when *Moſes* uttered them; I ſhall from them take occaſion to conſider,

1*ſt*, What is a principal end of the divine Revelations that have at different times been given to mankind.

2*dly*, In what reſpects theſe Revelations are adapted to this end.

3*dly*, I ſhall make ſome reflections upon that darkneſs under which we are left, and ſhew the influence which this ſhould have upon us. In all which, my Reverend Fathers and Brethren, I would be underſtood rather to offer hints upon a matter of importance, than to make a Diſcourſe ſuitable to the ſubject before me, or to the learned Audience here preſent.

FIRST, Let us conſider the end of the divine Revelations, which have at different times been given to mankind.

If we confine ourſelves to the *Moſaic* diſpenſation, and ſuppoſe that it is referred to in the words of the Text; there can be no doubt, that a principal end of it was to regulate the manners of the *Iſraelitiſh* Nation, and to form them to the practice of piety and virtue. *The things revealed belonged to them, and to their children*

children forever, that they might do all the words of that law. It was not the deſign of God, to lead them into the ſecrets of nature, or to unfold to them the higher principles of his œconomy. Theſe, few of mankind, and ſurely no whole nation, ever could comprehend. The object of the Moſt High was far different: more humble in appearance, but in its effects more ſublime and gracious; to inſtruct a whole people in their duty to God and man, to lead them thereby to true happineſs, and to render them inſtrumental in propagating the greateſt bleſſings among the reſt of mankind. Theſe diſcoveries might alſo ſerve other purpoſes, which were ſubordinate to this principal end, but all terminated in the great view of making them faithful ſervants to the Lord of heaven and earth, and dutiful ſubjects to the God of *Iſrael.*

When we aſcend to the earlier ages of the world, the divine communications appear ſtill to have the ſame ſalutary and noble tendency. Every diſcovery of his will, which God makes to mankind, ſerveth to encourage and ſupport the righteous, to diſcountenance and rebuke the wicked. It hath not appeared meet to God that we ſhould enjoy a full light with regard to this period. We are not, however, left in abſolute darkneſs; and what is wanting in the account of the divine Revelations, is amply compenſated by the hiſtory of Providence.

Providence. The memorials which are preſerved of thoſe early times ſuffice to inform us, what characters ſtood higheſt in the favour of God, and who felt the heavier weight of his diſpleaſure. We know who received the honourable diſtinction of being exempted from the great law of mortality, and that before his tranſlation he had this illuſtrious teſtimony, that *he pleaſed God*, walking before him in the paths of piety and virtue. We know what drew down from Heaven the moſt ſignal judgment that ever was inflicted upon this lower world: *The wickedneſs of man was great on the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* *. And when even this heavy judgment had loſt its efficacy, and the wickedneſs of man was riſing faſt to the ſame height in the new, which it had reached in the old world; we have another inſtance of the divine vengeance upon the guilty cities of *Sodom* and *Gommorrah*. While God was thus proclaiming the ends of his government in the conduct of Providence, it will hardly be ſuppoſed that he contradicted himſelf in the Revelations of his will. Between theſe, there muſt always have been an exact correſpondence. Every divine manifeſtation was ſtill contributing to the ſame end, tho', for many reaſons, this end could not be at all times equally in the view of mankind. The promiſe

* Gen. ii. 5.

promiſe to *Abraham*, the ſingular favour ſhewn towards his poſterity, and the whole *Moſaic* œconomy that ſtood in connection with it, formed a part of the ſame great plan. The immediate tendency of this diſpenſation was, to retrieve a rude people from wickedneſs and ſuperſtition; the ultimate object was, to prepare them for a more perfect inſtitution, and to diffuſe religion and righteouſneſs over the whole earth. Did God ever depart from this ſyſtem, and make any alteration in the end of his Revelations to that people? This cannot be eaſily believed. The ſame deſign was ſtill purſued, but new means were employed to accompliſh it. The duties of morality were more particularly inculcated, and ſome truths, which had been but darkly intimated in the *Moſaic* inſtitution, were afterwards more openly declared, in order to fortify the people of God againſt new temptations to vice and apoſtacy. This province was committed to the Prophets, who were the ſtated Teachers of righteouſneſs, and who were alſo ſent by God, on important occaſions, with exhortations and rebukes to his people,

Not only in the books of *Moſes*, which contain the foundations of their Religion and policy, and in the diſcourſes of the Prophets, which are an illuſtration and enforcement of them, but in all their other ſacred books, the ſame object is ſtill preſented to them. Their attention

attention is never required to abſtruſe and hidden truths, but to the knowledge and practice of their duty. They are ſtill taught, That *to fear God and keep his commandments, is the whole duty* and happineſs *of man* *.

The religion of JESUS made no change in this ſcheme; but became the continuation and perfection of it. Our Saviour came not *to deſtroy the law and the Prophets, but to fulfil* them †. He delivered not his doctrines to gratify curioſity, but to raiſe men to greater heights of piety and virtue. The wiſe and learned were to have no privileges in his kingdom, the ſimple and unlearned were to lie under no diſadvantages. Modeſt and good diſpoſitions were the chief qualifications of his diſciples. Theſe prepared them for underſtanding the great doctrines which he taught, and for enjoying all the bleſſings which he promiſed. Agreeable to the nature of his religion, were the effects of it: its moſt comfortable doctrines were often *hidden from the wiſe and prudent, and revealed unto babes* ‡. Theſe would have been unaccountable circumſtances in any Religion which conſiſted chiefly in profound and intricate ſpeculations, which profeſſed to lay open the original principles of natural, moral and political knowledge; but they are perfectly ſuitable to the genius of that Religion which hath

* Eccleſ. xii. 13.
† Matth. v. 17.
‡ Matth. xi. 25

hath no other end, than to promote piety towards God, and charity towards man, and to engage men *to live ſoberly, righteouſly and godly in this preſent world**. We proceed to conſider,

SECONDLY, In what reſpects the divine Revelations are adapted to this end. This will appear, when we attend to thoſe qualities which naturally give them a ſalutary and commanding power over the mind of man.

1ſt, This influence ariſeth from their Original. They are addreſſed to us in the name of God, the Creator and Governor of the world. In this reſpect they are diſtinguiſhed from the diſcoveries which ourſelves make, and from the information which we receive from our fellow-creatures, and for this reaſon are intitled to a very different regard. In many important caſes, we have no other guide than human knowledge and experience; and for this Light it becometh us to be thankful, and to make the beſt uſe of it. But ſubjects ſurely there are upon which a wiſe man would deſire a more full aſſurance, than he can ever derive from any mortal. A conſciouſneſs of human weakneſs, and a diffidence in the underſtanding of man, muſt often excite wiſhes for higher direction, and diſpoſe us to embrace whatever hath this character. What deference ſoever I may pay to enlightened

* Tit. ii. 12.

enlightened and virtuous men, whatever eſteem I may have for the doctrines they have taught, the laws they have eſtabliſhed, and the precepts they have delivered for the conduct and direction of life; yet never can I yield to them that unreſerved ſubmiſſion which I would willingly give to a divine authority. While human nature continueth to be what it is, a momentuous diſtinction will always be made between what is known to be only the word of man, and what is believed to be the word of God.

2*dly*, The influence of any ſuppoſed Revelations dependeth upon the matters contained in them. If theſe be of little moment, of a bad tendency, or unfit to command the attention, and ſtrike the minds of men, no good effects can be expected from them: But if the truths they preſent to us be great and noble, if the tendency of them be to heighten our eſteem of goodneſs, and to increaſe our abhorrence of vice and wickedneſs; if the motives they employ be ſuitable to the frame of human nature, and ſuch as have always made the ſtrongeſt impreſſion upon it; then we may hope for better fruits: That the attention will fix upon theſe great objects; that the underſtanding will be convinced, the affections engaged, and the whole man brought over to the intereſts of virtue. We may hope, that theſe effects will appear, at leaſt in ſome

meaſure, among thoſe who are favoured with ſuch declarations of the divine will. Whether theſe characters agree to the hiſtory, the doctrines and the laws which are contained in the Holy Scriptures, will be beſt determined by thoſe who conſider them with candor and impartiality: Perſons who come in this temper to peruſe the ſacred Record, will find many things to excite their higheſt admiration; They will meet with ſuch accounts of the Original of all things, of God's government of this world, of man's preſent condition and future deſtination, as are ſuitable to the moſt exalted views they can form of the divine nature.

According to the Scriptures, the world was created by an all-powerful, wiſe and good God. This earth, and every thing in it, proceeded from the ſame hand. Man, the principal inhabitant, was diſtinguiſhed above every other creature by the choiceſt marks of divine favour, being formed after the image of God, and furniſhed by his gracious Creator with every thing neceſſary to his comfort and happineſs. While he continued to be ſenſible of his dependence, and to live according to the law of his nature, the divine favour and bounty followed him; but having tranſgreſſed the commandment of God, and loſt his innocence, he fell under the diſpleaſure of his Maker, and became acquainted with new and ſtrange miſeries.

miſeries. Within, he began to feel ſhame and remorſe; without, nature aſſumed a new and hoſtile appearance; the ground was curſed for his ſake, toil and painful labour became neceſſary for his ſubſiſtance, and it was determined by his offended Lord, that he ſhould return to the duſt from whence he came. Having diſplayed his goodneſs and juſtice, the Moſt High reſolved to manifeſt his mercy, and to mitigate the diſtreſs of his fallen creature by the hopes of a reſtoration. Theſe hopes were given to our firſt Parents immediately after the Fall, and were renewed to their poſterity at different periods, according to the exigencies of mankind; in order to ſweeten the condition of human nature, and to encourage men in the ſervice of God. At length, when this and every other branch of religious knowledge was well nigh loſt, when ignorance, ſuperſtition and idolatry had overſpread the whole earth, it pleaſed God to deviſe a new and extraordinary remedy for this great evil. He ſelected from among the nations one people, which he appointed to be the depoſitary of his Oracles. He erected among them a civil and religious policy, favorable to this great deſign. He recalled the fundamental article of all Religion, the belief of his own Being and Providence. He aſſerted to himſelf the character of the Creator and the Governor of the world, in oppoſition to the idols

of

of the nations. This momentuous truth he eſtabliſhed by the moſt ſtriking and illuſtrious miracles; and, to ſecure it from being again neglected or forgotten, he made it to be a part of the *Iſraelitiſh* conſtitution, that all religious worſhip ſhould be confined to the one living, and true God. Other important truths were alſo revived or diſcovered to that people in the way they could beſt apprehend them. Natural and ſignificant rites, various types and emblems then much in uſe, and well underſtood, were employed, to convey the knowledge and ſtrengthen the impreſſion of divine things. The great end of all was to ſhew, that the Moſt High was placable; that he would favour the righteous, and puniſh the wicked; that the time would come, when the intereſts of Religion would ſtand upon a better foundation and remarkably flouriſh over the whole earth. As this happy period approached, the means of their reſtoration were pointed out, and particular predictions made concerning the divine Perſon by whom it was to be effected. At laſt the appointed time came, and the great Deliverer appeared, who was to unite Jew and Gentile, in his ſpiritual kingdom, and to eſtabliſh that perfect Religion which ſhould for ever govern mankind. The chief characters of this Religion, which diſtinguiſhed it from that of nature, and from

that

that formerly known to the Jews, were the moſt ample aſſurances of mercy to the ſincere penitent, for the ſake of the atonement made by Jeſus Chriſt; the fulleſt promiſes of divine aid under all the difficulties and diſtreſſes of life; the abridgment of thoſe ritual ordinances, which were adapted to the rude and infant ſtate of the world; more qualified and reſerved promiſes of temporal bleſſings, and a clearer view of a future ſtate, wherein the ſeeming inequalities of Providence ſhould vaniſh, in which the righteous ſhould be inconceivably happy, and the wicked miſerable.

This very imperfect view of the divine Revelations, may enable us to judge what are the advantages of thoſe who enjoy them: whether they are not *bleſſed who know the joyful ſound, who walk in the light of God's countenance* *; whether that *people be not happy whoſe God is the Lord* †. We may now reflect, whether, amidſt all the efforts that have ever been made for the improvement and perfection of human nature, ſo many intereſting and ſtriking truths were ever preſented to the mind of man, *We may aſk of the days that are paſt which were before us ſince the day that God created man upon the earth, we may aſk from the one ſide of heaven to the other, whether there hath been any ſuch thing*

* Pſal. lxxxix. 15.
† Pſal. cxliv. 15.

*thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it.**

3*dly*, The excellency of the divine Revelations may be eſtimated from the manner in which they have been communicated to mankind. Had no regard been ſhewn to the different circumſtances of the world in the manifeſtations which God is ſuppoſed to have made of his will, this defect alone muſt have leſſened their efficacy, and furniſhed an evident objection againſt their divine Original. The condition of the world in general, and of every particular nation, hath been very different in different periods. For this reaſon mankind have required various ſchemes of Religion, in order to their improvement. The great and fundamental articles, indeed, like the end of it, always have been, and ever will be the ſame. In theſe there can be no change. But the illuſtration and enforcement of them often muſt be very different. The meaſure wherein uſeful truths are to be revealed, or are to acquire a divine authority, the views to be given of Providence, the forms to be preſcribed for religious worſhip, the motives for ſecuring obedience to the Law of God, and the inſtitutions for ſtrengthening good habits, all theſe muſt vary with the ſituation of the world; nor would they, without this accommodation, be fit to accompliſh their great purpoſe. The

* Deut. iv. 32.

The divine conduct towards mankind, as recorded in the Holy Scriptures, ſtrongly exemplifieth theſe obſervations.

In the infancy of the world, before the minds of men were fully opened, and when they were little accuſtomed to ſpiritual and abſtract meditation, we find great inſtances of condeſcenſion to the weak and unimproved ſtate of human nature. This appears in every part of that intercourſe which God held with mankind; in the worſhip he accepted, in the laws he eſtabliſhed, and in the ſanctions by which he enforced them.

The worſhip which God then received was ſuitable to the condition of creatures, who could not, without the aſſiſtance of ſenſible objects, attach themſelves to thoſe which are ſpiritual and inviſible. To men in this ſtate an offering of the fruits of the earth, and an animal ſacrifice, were not unnatural expreſſions of ſubmiſſion and dependence. The practice, without doubt, was early and univerſal. Great controverſy hath indeed been made, whether we owe it to a divine or human original; and oppoſite opinions have, for the moſt part, been embraced by the friends and the enemies of our holy faith. Both, however, have generally concurred in aſſerting its repugnancy to the reaſon of mankind; and each imagineth, that, if this be admitted, he

gains

gains an advantage towards the ſupport of his reſpective ſyſtem. But, whatever may be the fate of an obſcure queſtion; whether this practice flowed originally from divine inſtitution, or having firſt occurred to man, was afterwards reformed, and authoriſed by God: Upon either ſuppoſition, the worſhip may be deemed natural; while one branch of it at the ſame time contains an apt prefiguration of the great ſacrifice which was to be offered in due time for the ſins of the world. For let us view the human nature making an approach to the Governor of the world, before the improvements of reaſon and Religion, and let us think whether this addreſs will not partake much of the manner of man? Can a man in theſe circumſtances more naturally expreſs his homage for the various bounty of Heaven, than by ſeparating ſome part of it from his own, and appropriating it to a ſacred uſe? Can he more naturally repreſent his guilty ſtate, than by animal ſacrifice and vicarious ſuffering? Is there any more obvious and ſignificant method of keeping up a ſenſe of his guilt and demerits, and of nouriſhing his hopes in the divine mercy? All this, we may be told, can beget no rational aſſurance of pardon, but leaves the ſinner juſt where he was. No more can lamentations, deprecation of puniſhment, nor even the firmeſt purpoſes of future obedience; which are the natural

expreſſions

expreſſions of unfeigned repentance. All aſſurance of mercy muſt be derived from another ſource: either from a more extenſive view of the divine government than hath been yet attained by any man, or from the expreſs promiſe of God. But if the offering of ſacrifice be a natural worſhip, why may not mercy be promiſed to him who performeth it with uprightneſs, and this mercy diſpenſed for reaſons with which the worſhipper is little acquainted? When the objections againſt this part of Religion are duly conſidered, do not many of theſe ariſe from a ſyſtem too refined for the earlier ages of the world, and perhaps for any age that hath yet appeared? Do not ſome of them, in their conſequences, even impeach the propriety of the atonement, which our Saviour made for the ſins of the world? Do not ſuch refinements contain rather a cenſure upon the weakneſs of human nature, than any juſt argument againſt a worſhip which is intirely ſuitable to an imperfect ſtate.

The ſame regard to human frailty, and to the circumſtances of mankind, appeareth remarkably in another ordinance, which was appointed for preſerving the knowledge of God, and attaching men to his ſervice, the inſtitution of the Holy Sabbath.

This feſtival had been early inſtituted for a memorial of the creation of the world, by the one living and true God: but, like

other inſtitutions, had fallen into diſuſe, till the Moſt High revived it with peculiar circumſtances, and, by a peremptory law, enjoined the obſervation of it upon his choſen people: furniſhing in this way a natural antidote againſt Polytheiſm and Idolatry, and keeping before their eyes that great event which muſt for ever be the chief foundation of true Religion. Whoever conſidereth how little diſpoſed men commonly are, eſpecially when in a low and ſervile condition, to raiſe their thoughts beyond the ordinary courſe of nature, and to ſuppoſe the world was ever in a different ſtate from the preſent, will ſee great reaſon to admire the divine wiſdom, in recalling ſo frequently to the mind the firſt Original of all things. By this ſolemn and ſacred reſt unto the Lord, by the ſtrict prohibition of all unneceſſary wordly occupation, men of every condition, maſters and ſervants, being freed from ſecular engagements, were invited, and almoſt conſtrained to remember and to do homage to their common Lord and Maker. A part of Religion ſo fundamental could never be too ſtrictly guarded: nor need we wonder, that the moſt exemplary ſeverity was exerciſed againſt the tranſgreſſors of this law.

The whole Jewiſh Ritual is evidently formed upon the ſame plan; being adapted to a people which hath made ſmall advances in religious knowledge, and needeth the aſſiſtance of external

external objects to fix them in the worſhip of their inviſible Governor. And while it ſerveth to this end, is ſo contrived by the wiſdom of God, as to ſhadow forth thoſe ſpiritual bleſſings, *thoſe good things to come*, which are afterwards to be enjoyed under a more perfect diſpenſation.

Not only the religious worſhip which God preſcribed, but the laws alſo which he gave to his antient people, bear the ſame marks of divine condeſcenſion: plain in their meaning, few in number, and powerful by the authority from which they proceeded, on the one hand, they reſtrained the more dangerous paſſions, and, on the other, gave ſome indulgence to a corrupt people. Nor, without this temperament, could they have naturally obtained their end. The *Iſraelites* were not to be left under the dominion of vice and ſuperſtition, and a perfect law they could not bear. What courſe was then to be purſued, but what a wiſe parent holds with a perverſe child, and a ſkillful Lawgiver with a rude people.

But in no reſpect is the ſyſtem of Providence more remarkable than in the different ſanctions which God gave to his laws in the early and the later periods of the *Jewiſh* ſtate.

The end of a ſanction is, to ſecure obedience to the law; and the value of it muſt depend upon its influence over thoſe perſons to whom it is addreſſed. Whether temporal or

ſpiritual,

ſpiritual, preſent or future bleſſings, would have moſt power over a groſs-hearted people, will hardly bear much controverſy. The former have always made a ſtrong impreſſion upon mankind: the latter have acceſs only to minds improved by religious and moral diſcipline. Without this preparation, all promiſes of a ſpiritual future happineſs would be unintelligible, and of no efficacy; and any attempt to repreſent them by a figurative deſcription, would ſerve only to degrade a ſtate into which fleſh and blood can in no ſenſe enter. That ſome pious men under the old diſpenſation carried their thoughts beyond the preſent life, cannot be reaſonably called in queſtion by a Chriſtian; but that the body of the *Iſraelites* were ſo ſpiritual at the firſt inſtitution of their commonwealth, as to admit the doctrine of a future ſtate for an article of the public Religion, might be ſafely denied, tho' we had not the deciſion of the Holy Scriptures.

The great motives to obedience, among this people, were the hopes of temporal proſperity, if they hearkened to the law of God, and the fear of great calamities if they neglected it. If they ſerved God, they ſhould ſit, every one under his vine and his fig-tree, and there ſhould be none to make them afraid; but if they forſook the Lord, he would forſake them, and they ſhould become an eaſy prey to their enemies. In later times, indeed,

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when this people were in a more enlightened ſtate, higher proſpects were opened to them, which failed not to produce happy effects. They were now farther advanced in religious knowledge, had acquired juſter ſentiments concerning moral and divine ſubjects, and were better qualified for reliſhing thoſe ſpiritual future rewards which God hath reſerved for his faithful ſervants.

In this manner did the moſt high God ſuit his Revelations to the condition of mankind; holding forth to them ſuch a light as they could bear, that would not dazzle and confound, but guide and direct them; ſpeaking to them, not in that language which was moſt perfect, but in that which they could beſt underſtand; treating them as weak, ignorant and ſinful creatures; leaving them for a time under ſuch prejudices and errors both in opinion and conduct, as did not obſtruct the immediate end of his Revelations; and this end being obtained, gradually leading them forward to perfection. *He ſpake at ſundry times and in divers manners**, to his antient people *by the Prophets*, and at laſt, after due preparation, *he ſpake* to the whole world by *his own Son*. To this divine perſon it was reſerved, to make men more fully, tho' ſtill imperfectly, acquainted with the councils of Heaven, with the ſpiritual worſhip which is moſt acceptable to God, with the purity and extent of

* Heb. i. 1

of his law, with the means of reconciliation thro' a Mediator, and with the happineſs of a future ſtate. On theſe accounts, our Saviour is indeed *the light of the world;* and bleſſed are they *who follow him; they ſhall not walk in darkneſs, but have the light of life.*

Having conſidered the Revelations which God hath publiſhed and in what reſpects they promote the ends of his government;

THIRDLY, Let us reflect upon that darkneſs under which we are left, and obſerve the influence which this ſhould have upon us: for while many things are revealed for the benefit of mankind, there are ſtill *ſome ſecrets which belong to the Lord.* Theſe are of two kinds; ſuch as are involved in impenetrable darkneſs, and ſuch as are partially, and not fully revealed. The former are an improper object of curioſity; the latter may profitably employ our attention. With regard to theſe, it is of conſequence to know, how far our light will carry us, and what the nature of this light is; in what caſes we have for our guide the authority of *God*, and in what caſes we have only the reaſonings and conjectures of men. Could we form a ſound judgment in theſe particulars, we ſhould be kept from many fruitleſs inquiries, and ſecured againſt unhappy opinions about ſeveral important doctrines in the Holy Scriptures.

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The firſt object preſented to our faith in Scripture, is the Creation of the World by God. The hiſtory of this event is ſimple and popular, and ſuitable to the end in view. Polytheiſm and Idolatry prevailed greatly in the world when the Moſaic Inſtitution was introduced, and a principal deſign of it was, to check and extirpate them. Nothing could better ſerve this purpoſe, than to lead men up to the original of all things, and to ſhew that the objects to which they offered their religious homage were only the creatures of God, and had no powers but what were derived from him; that not only man, and every thing on earth, but the ſun, moon, and whole hoſt of heaven, were formed by God, and depended upon him. This is done in the Hiſtory of the Creation. There the God of *Iſrael* is declared to be the Creator of all things. Under this character, he is diſtinguiſhed from the idols of the nations, and preſented to the *Iſraelites* as the only object of all religious worſhip. Whoever ſuppoſeth this to be the aim of the ſacred Hiſtorian, will find no reaſon to think he hath miſſed it. But ſome have embraced a very different opinion. Not contented with finding here the foundations of piety, they imagine they have diſcovered the depths of Philoſophy. And, by ſtrained interpretations of this Hiſtory, and fanciful applications of other paſſages of Scripture

ture, they have erected a ſyſtem, which in their eyes is the real ſyſtem of Nature. It had been well, for their own ſakes, if they had gone no further: and, ſatisfied to enjoy theſe opinions themſelves, had ſhewed more charity towards their brethren who were in other ſentiments, and who have with more ſucceſs ſearched into the works of God. Such appearances, however, are not without their uſe. They ſerve to ſhew, that neither piety nor zeal are an effectual ſecurity againſt errors; and that errors, harmleſs in themſelves, loſe this character, when men pretend to found them in the word of God. They ſerve to ſhew, that, beſides candor and integrity, ſome branches of human learning are highly uſeful for vindicating the honour of divine Revelation, and for guarding men againſt the allurements of Enthuſiaſm, as well as againſt the ſnares of Infidelity.

Similar obſervations may be made with regard to the fundamental doctrine of the New Teſtament; the atonement made for the ſins of the world by Jeſus Chriſt. This is juſtly eſteemed the great peculiarity of our Religion, and the foundation upon which every Chriſtian ſhould build his hopes. The ſcriptural view of it is plain and uniform. "The whole "world being guilty before God, he ſeeth "fit to diſpenſe his mercy to them through "his own Son as a Mediator. This divine

"perſon

" Perſon being cloathed with human nature,
" and having given perfect obedience to the
" law of God, offereth himſelf a ſacrifice for the
" ſins of the world, maketh ſatisfaction to
" divine juſtice, and bringeth men into a
" ſtate of favour and reconciliation: in re-
" gard to the merits of this obedience and
" ſacrifice, a full aſſurance of pardon is given
" to every penitent believer, and the higheſt
" bleſſings beſtowed upon him."

That the death of Chriſt is to be conſidered as a ſacrifice, appeareth evident from the phraſes which are employed upon this ſubject. Our Saviour's *body* is ſaid *to be broken* and his *blood to be ſhed for the remiſſion of ſins* *; he is ſaid *to be made ſin for us who knew no ſin* †; *to bear our ſins in his body upon the tree* ‡, and *to put away ſin by the ſacrifice of himſelf* ||. After reading ſuch declarations in the Word of God, it might be thought, nothing remained for a Chriſtian, but to receive with humility and gratitude the mercy of God, in the way he hath been pleaſed to offer it; to rejoice in being at peace with his offended Creator, *and to ſerve him without fear in holineſs and righteouſneſs all the days of his life* **. This, however, hath not been always the caſe.

* 1 Cor. xi. 24. Matth. xxvi. 28.
† 2 Cor. v. 21.
‡ 1 Pet. ii. 24.
|| Heb. ix. 26.
** Luke i. 74, 75.

Many ſeem more anxious to know the reaſons of the divine conduct, than the rules of their own. They look as if they would renounce the greateſt of all benefits, unleſs they could diſcover the reaſons for which it was beſtowed. This ſpirit hath given riſe to many curious and bold inquiries with regard to this part of the divine œconomy; all have agreed, that God is placable, and that he will pardon the ſins of the ſincere penitent. But in what manner the mediation of Chriſt conduceth to this end, hath been a fruitful ſubject of debate among Chriſtians. Whoever reſts ſatisfied with the Scriptural account, in its plaineſt and moſt obvious meaning, will find himſelf little concerned in this controverſy. And it is a happineſs the far greater part of Chriſtians are in this caſe. They ſee their Creator offended, the neceſſity of being reconciled to him, and rejoice in the ſatisfaction which is made to his Juſtice. Their natural and common notions are not ſo far oppreſſed by artificial theories, as to make them ſee the impropriety of a vicarious ſuffering, or any of the other abſurdities which have been charged upon this doctrine. But others are not ſo eaſily ſatisfied. They think they may enter farther into the principles of the divine government. With them it ſeems to be taken for granted that God revealeth no doctrines, and publiſheth no laws, without diſcovering fully

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the reaſons of them, and that theſe reaſons are delivered in the Word of God. An impartial review of the Holy Scriptures ſhould naturally lead to an oppoſite concluſion, and teach mankind that no ſuch diſcoveries are there to be expected. The moſt comfortable doctrines for ſupporting our faith, and the moſt excellent laws for regulating our conduct, are there indeed clearly and fully publiſhed. But the ultimate reaſons, either of the one or the other, are very rarely, if ever, brought to light. When therefore we aſcend higher in our inquiries, and, by reaſoning from principles in the Holy Scriptures, form more general concluſions than are there expreſsly to be found; we ought to remember by what light we are walking, and that the reaſonings of men are not to be charged upon the Oracles of God. We ſhould then be perſuaded, that what ſyſtem or theory ſoever may be embraced with regard to the atonement by Jeſus Chriſt, the New Teſtament carrieth us no higher than the obvious meaning of theſe comprehenſive words, that *Chriſt ſuffered for ſins, the juſt for the unjuſt, that he might bring us to God* *.

Another momentuous doctrine of our Religion hath had a like fate with thoſe already mentioned, that which repreſents the neceſſity

* Pet. iii. 18.

neceſſity of divine aid in order to qualify men for the kingdom of God. If any doctrine were to have eſcaped cavil, and to have been received without unneceſſary refinement, this privilege might have been expected for one which is ſo friendly to the confeſſed weakneſs of human nature. But here alſo we are diſappointed, and find many leſs concerned about a gracious promiſe, and the conſolations which it affordeth, than about the manner of accompliſhing it. The chief queſtion ſtill is, *how can theſe things be* ?*. Were our inquiries here conducted with modeſty and ſobriety, were our own reaſonings, however probable or juſt, never confounded with the declarations of Holy Scripture, they might ſometimes be uſeful, and could never be dangerous. But, when this diſtinction is neglected, when the Oracles of God are preſſed into a ſervice for which they never were intended, when private opinions come armed with divine authority, then it is eaſy to imagine thoſe unhappy conteſts which have often diſtracted the Chriſtian Church; we muſt then wiſh and pray, that Chriſtians would become more ſenſible of the difference between divine and human authority, that they would be more careful to diſcern how much of any doctrine is brought to light, and how much of the ſame is left in

* John iii. 9.

in obſcurity. We muſt wiſh they were more fully perſuaded, that, tho' God hath revealed what is ſufficient for the ſalvation of our ſouls, he hath not thought proper to gratify our curioſity by a compleat account either of the natural or the ſpiritual world. We muſt wiſh the words of God were more reverently heard. *The wind bloweth where it liſteth, and thou hearеſt the ſound thereof, but canſt not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: ſo is every one that is born of the ſpirit**. And, *as thou knoweſt not what is the way of the ſpirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even ſo thou knoweſt not the works of God who maketh all*†.

The obſervations which have been made, may be of uſe,

1. When we are conſidering the controverſies that have ariſen among Chriſtians.

2. When we are examining the objections which have been made againſt our Religion.

I. When we are conſidering the controverſies that have ariſen among Chriſtians. In all diſputes of this kind, the chief queſtion hath commonly been, upon which ſide ſtands the authority of the Holy Scripture? Nor can any queſtion be more important: as this authority,

* John iii. 8.
† Eccleſ. xi. 5.

thority, when it can be obtained, muſt be deciſive with every Chriſtian. There is another conſideration, however, of much moment, which hath not at all times met with due regard; whether the matters, which come frequently into debate among Chriſtians, be at all determined in the Word of God? The affirmative hath perhaps too often been taken for granted by Chriſtians of every denomination. It is in ſome ſort natural to men to think, that God is ſuch a one as themſelves; that what is of much moment in their eyes, cannot ſeem to be otherwiſe in his. Inſtead of examining what diſcoveries God hath made to mankind, and then conſidering their propriety and importance, an oppoſite conduct hath often been held. Men have firſt judged what was fit to be revealed, and then concluded that it was revealed. What they judge neceſſary to be known muſt be found ſomewhere in Scripture, and the Revelations of God muſt take their meaſure from the opinions and curioſity of man. Had Chriſtians always conſidered, with due attention and candour, the obvious general ſcope of the ſacred Writings; had they reflected that theſe were not deſigned to promote ſpeculation and learning, but to advance the intereſts of piety and virtue; that they were not confined to perſons of knowledge and inquiry, but intended either for a whole nation, or for all mankind: Had they attend-

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ed to the ſimplicity and popularity with which they are conceived, many curious queſtions had not been grafted upon them, which have often inflamed the Church of God. *I ſpeak as unto wiſe men, judge ye what I ſay.*

II. The foregoing obſervations may be uſeful, when we are examining the objections which have been made againſt our Religion. Many of theſe are founded in the various forms of the divine Revelations, the different occaſions on which they have been publiſhed, and their apparent congruity, in many reſpects, with the prevailing opinions and cuſtoms of the world. If there be any weight in the reflections which have been offered upon this ſubject, theſe arguments will be of little force. Man muſt be treated according to his condition. God is always the ſame. But the human nature is various and changeable, and, in order to its reformation, requires ſome meaſure of compliance to its preſent ſtate. This principle is admitted in every human policy, and the juſt application of it is eſteemed the higheſt merit of any Lawgiver on earth. And why that which is judged wiſdom in man, ſhould not be deemed wiſdom in God, while the ſame end is to be accompliſhed by natural means, will not eaſily appear to an impartial man. One chief excellency of any Religion conſiſts in its power over that part of mankind

kind to which it is addreſſed. If the Jewiſh and Chriſtian Revelations be brought to this teſt, there is no reaſon to decline the iſſue: no religious ſyſtems ever laid ſuch a powerful hold of the mind of man: other Religions have riſen and fallen with the nations to which they belonged. Had our Religion ſprung from no higher an original, it had probably before this time ſhared a like fate, and been now ranked among thoſe *local and temporary Theologies*, which are neglected and forgotten.

But, when we conſider the manner in which it was at firſt eſtabliſhed, without the aid of ſecular power and policy, and in oppoſition to the prejudices, ſuperſtitions and vices of the world; when we reflect upon the progreſs it hath made, and the great revolution it hath produced in the opinions and manners of mankind; muſt we not conclude, that there is ſomewhere a cauſe proportioned to ſo great and ſingular an effect? And where ſhall we find it, but either in the miracles by which this Religion was confirmed, in the excellent matters of which it conſiſts, in their marvellous accommodation to the frame of human nature, and to the circumſtances of the world, or in that divine power which hath in all ages protected and enlarged the Church of God. To which ever of theſe cauſes we aſcribe the ſucceſs of the Goſpel, or if, to account for this

this event, we unite them all; ſtill we ſhall arrive at the ſame concluſion, That our Religion is neither the offſpring of enthuſiaſm or ſuperſtition, nor the invention of wiſe or deſigning men, nor the reſult of accidental cauſes, but ſprings from the wiſdom and power of God.

F I N I S.